

CAMDO Spring meeting 2012 Réunion du printemps de l'ODMAC

MEETING NOTES

DAY 1 – Thursday, May 3rd

Vancouver Art Gallery

Presentation by Doug Sirdurdson, Head of Visual Arts Canada Council for the Arts

The newspaper yesterday was full of news about art, a Munch painting and its price, contemporary art in China, a full page ad for an art installation in Toronto.

There was not much about art the way we talk about it in those articles but quite a lot in terms of marketing, social positioning, etc.

What does this rise in awareness of, or interest in the visual arts mean for us:

- that there is opportunity
- it's about how art locates itself in the world
- how the imagination shifts
- for Trollope or Thackeray wrote about the chase for money
- and it is interesting to locate our interests in this way
- there's an opinion that the authority over the public good is changing from public to private
- have to locate our passions within these things however they might shift

To trace some history

I attended the CAMDO meeting in Toronto in 2009 and reported on an advisory committee that did a program review. For that review, twelve CAMDO members and the Board executive were consulted. There were four areas that had some revisions. At that time, the program was only 10 years old. We didn't want to make false promises. It came after 15 years of project-based support for publications or exhibitions to operating support. The cap on awards was dropped. The criteria were reduced from nine to three: resource management, artistic merit and institutional effectiveness. Equity, a priority for Council, would not be codified as a criteria, but institutions would be allowed to manage this themselves.

There is a taxonomy with the galleries: those with collections and those without, those that are autonomous institutions and those that are not.

There are also two ideas for what an art gallery is: one is to advance artistic practice and to serve an interested public in the process, and the other is to serve audiences and a public and serve artistic practice in the process. We have to balance these two approaches/types of institutions. There was a suggestion to have mini competitions but the consulting group was firmly against this. They were against the idea of fixed categorization of the galleries.

2009 was the beginning of the first three-year grant cycle. I didn't manage the process

because I had moved up to Head by that time. But I observed the results; the list seemed to correspond to the goals of the program. It had coherence. But that said, it is still a new program, not perfect. Some institutions may feel they are not placed properly but I believe the coherence of the program will improve over time.

Two months ago your Executive Director asked if I wanted to convene another consultation, but at the time were facing the prospect of cuts so the exercise would likely have been little more than rearranging the deck chairs. Nevertheless, I want to keep a close relationship with CAMDO.

About Canada Council's strategic plan

The current plan carries forward 5 elements identified previously:

- support to individuals
- support to organizations
- equity
- partnerships
- internal organizational review

and 3 themes:

- new technology
- public engagement
- synergy

These can be compared to the Arts Council of England, whose slogan announces their goal: "great art for everyone". Their focus is

- youth, and
- social cohesion.

The latter has raised eyebrows.

About the recent federal budget

We can celebrate that Council was spared cuts, along with the national museums, but I still have to warn you, although spared cuts, there are no increases, which doesn't allow for anything new. In addition, with this "grace" comes a higher expectation from government, in particular to focus on demonstrable results. There is a very particular language: "management by objectives," "strategy," "performance indicators."

Canada Council has dodged cuts this time but also has to move in this direction or at least indicate that we understand the direction being recommended. Council has internalized this direction, for example, I have to report on how programs serve their communities. So far so good. But the Board and Council also have to evaluate all of Council's activities and point to results, cost savings, improved market access, etc. Bob Sirman will be doing a teleconference with the arts service agencies who will be advised what all this means.

What is to be demonstrated? Something, a certain vitality, for example.

What is likely to happen? We will see some movement. There is a relatively new board

at Canada Council. There has been no change in operating grants since three years ago, but how can a jury make a decision that holds things exactly as they were before? There is an assumption that movement is how money works; if not moving, it's dead. Even though we know corporations have all kinds of dead money like that, there is this core logic of movement. That said, things can be stable within programs or within sections. The visual arts budget is fixed at \$20 million but we would like to see some movement there. There is a need to argue for increases relative to the other sections.

So what is key? Aspiration. To show movement. In tough times there's a tendency to hunker down but there's something to be said for real aspiration, and for rewarding that. Raw ideas, things that show vitality.

Questions:

Matthew Teitelbaum: One of the crises is we don't know what we are doing FOR WHOM. Is Council doing anything to look at our effectiveness differently?

Doug: We put "public engagement" into the strategic plan without really fully understanding it, but in the visual arts, we are all about public engagement. Institutions are an example of the public will. The WAG might be one of the oldest institutions in Canada; a young city might want to imagine themselves an arena, a symphony.

Matthew: So what does that mean? Is Council developing tools for measuring this?

Doug: No, operating grant changes are judgments on program. For public engagement, the question is how Council can help formulate criteria for example, and the answer is we are not there yet.

Peter Thompson: I'm puzzled by the language, new technology, synergy. How can these things be evaluated, like vitality?

Doug: New technology is not what the museums do but what the world does; the test would be what activities you are doing in relation to that.

Jann Bailey: What about technology and training?

Matthew Teitelbaum: Perhaps the question might be between content and spectacle?

Doug: The measure of an institution is its program, its curatorial accomplishment based on research and ... the difference between culture and art - both are fascinating; it falls to the curators to shine.

Mirko Zardini: Behind the policies and statements of Council there is a clear position. Why not have them written down? It would not be difficult for us to deconstruct from there if it was more transparent, e.g. how new technologies are framed is important, whether you are talking about announcing a possibility, or questioning the fundamental practices of an institution. It would be useful to have some direction here. Without this, you have the feeling that something is missing.

Barbara Fischer: What are the indicators you need to leverage more money for the visual arts section? What do "aspirational," or "vitality" mean?

Doug: Council's Board is noticing the discrepancy between how the sections are funded and what is happening out there. The idea behind what I was saying at the beginning about the newspaper and the visual arts; this kind of coverage seems more on the pulse. The visual arts are current now in a way compared to theatre, so there is a logical advantage to be taken.